

2010

A Response to a New Book about Maxine Greene's Philosophy

David T. Hansen

Teachers College, Columbia University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hansen, David T. (2010) "A Response to a New Book about Maxine Greene's Philosophy," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 5 :
No. 1 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol5/iss1/17>

This Special Section 2 is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

ARTICLE

A Response to a New Book about Maxine Greene's Philosophy

David T. Hansen

Teachers College, Columbia University

Maxine Greene's work comes to vibrant life in a new book written by John Baldacchino. The book is entitled *Education Beyond Education: Self and the Imaginary in Maxine Greene's Philosophy* (Lang, 2008). Baldacchino is a professor of Art Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is both a practitioner of fine art and an insightful philosophical critic of art and its relation to education. His career-long commitment to thinking with care about these matters nicely positioned him to undertake an inquiry into the offering to our fellow human beings that Greene has been putting forth for several decades.

In the book Baldacchino richly engages Greene's prose. In a particularly successful way he enacts his methodology of trying to *dialogue* with her work rather than to ventriloquate her voice through his own. The book features a great deal of Greene's language, showing her thinking out loud, so to speak, about educational questions, questions of meaning and purpose, political and aesthetic concerns, and a good deal more. I think any serious reader of Greene's work will find Baldacchino's interpretation of her overall oeuvre, pivoting around the diptych of self and the imaginary, to be enlightening and educative. His sustained dialogue with her encourages the reader to return to Greene's texts and to look again both at their core claims and at the form in which they are expressed. Any serious reader new to Greene's work will find Baldacchino's book a helpful guide and resource – a good companion, so to speak.

Baldacchino draws out the importance of the humanities and arts in the study and practice of education today. He helps us appreciate, in a philosophically rich manner, just how central these modes of being have been to Greene. In reading his account I was struck again by the fact that Greene invested herself in the arts and humanities at a time when analytic philosophy ruled the roost in philosophy of education and positivism, in empirical educational research.

When Greene published *Teacher as Stranger* in 1973 – a book that Baldacchino's inquiry led me back to – most philosophy of education saw itself as clarifying the concepts of education and providing these clarifications to teachers as tools and instruments. This work was helpful then and it remains invaluable today. It is important for teachers to be able to distinguish teaching from indoctrination, preaching, training, and the like. However, instead of merely analyzing concepts such as education and teaching, Greene cultivated a novel approach to understanding that led her through literature, existentialist philosophy, John Dewey's pioneering philosophies of education and of art, poetry, painting, and a good deal more. Greene sought to elucidate meanings and significances in teaching as a human practice. To borrow words from Maggie Lampert (1990), herself an accomplished educational scholar, in this case of research on mathematics education, I think Greene sought not to determine whether general propositions about learning or teaching are true or false but rather to further our understanding of the *character* of these particular kinds of human activity and experience.

Moreover, in marked contrast with the sometimes impersonal style of analytic philosophy of education, Greene sought to speak directly to teachers, to their hopes, fears, and predicaments. She spoke to teachers' heartfelt and abiding sense that their visions of the work matter even in a policy and institutional system that too often seems to devalue them and indeed seems to want to deskill them, to render their calling into a mode of engineering. Greene has always written to and for her fellow educators even while sustaining the philosopher's metier of analyzing with care words, texts, and arguments.

Teacher as Stranger remains my favorite of Greene's books, not just because it was the first one I read, which is true, but because of the pioneering, humanist gesture it contains that I've briefly sketched here. In some ways the work is like a textbook; it even has drawings (which I like). To me it recalls the ancient idea of a hand-book or *vade mecum*. It is a book for teachers to keep in hand, to help guide them through the travails and joys of the work. Her approach echoes philosophy understood as an art of living, as a love of wisdom-in-life, rather than philosophy understood as theory. The approach embodies a well justified belief that philosophy as the art of living resonates with the work of teaching. The approach shows teachers why it is open to them to be philosophical about their work, and why such philosophizing can be so empowering and enlightening.

Moreover, I continue to appreciate *Teacher as Stranger* because when I read it long ago in graduate school, I was struggling, like many others, to make sense of the narrow views of positivism that seemed to drive considerable educational research at the time. Greene's work helped me appreciate why it is problematic to presume one can study human beings as one might the cells of the body or the forces of wind, light, and gravity. Unlike other entities in the world (to the best of our current knowledge), human beings interpret themselves and their lives. They interpret their settings and their doings. They not only *are* but also have *concepts* of who and what they are. Consequently they cannot be treated as interchangeable parts of a system.

I am grateful to Baldacchino for leading me back to a rereading of *Teacher as Stranger*. In broad terms, I think Baldacchino successfully portrays Greene's style of philosophy of education – and I do mean *portray* or *paint*. Baldacchino does not offer an interpretation that would supplant Greene's own voice and approach. He reads her work as constituting neither pure theory nor pure experience or practicality. Rather, he addresses it as a unique engagement that calls for other words; and here, neither existentialist, pragmatist, hermeneutic, feminist, phenomenological, or any other familiar school of inquiry can do the job, even though Greene's *oeuvre* incorporates elements of them all. As she says in the introduction to *The Dialectic of Freedom*, she seems Emerson-like to have found herself in multidisciplinary. I mean *found* in Emerson's (1844/1983) dual sense of *finding* herself – finding and cultivating her voice – even while *founding* her self as a being in the world. In so doing she *finds* a mode of thinking and philosophizing that has drawn many diverse seekers of a meaningful educational life.

In keeping with Baldacchino's emphasis on a dialogue with Greene, I will turn in my remaining remarks to a question the book raises for me. Is it possible to over-emphasize movement, uncertainty, the unfinished, and the open work? Put another way, is it possible to be too certain about the absence of certainty in our lives? The book bops René Descartes on the nose, and I wondered about this ritualized clubbing of the 17th century Frenchman. He was a dedicated philosopher, mathematician, moralist, and friend to many humanist-minded people seeking to break out from the highly dogmatic and ideological worldviews produced by the wars of religion. He was also an educator, serving for example as tutor to the remarkable humanist Queen Christina of Sweden. As is well known, Descartes felt confident that he had found a kind of bedrock in his famous *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am; 1641/1996). I find his outlook quite compelling. As I read Baldacchino's book and thought about Greene's work, I had no doubts that I was thinking. I knew this quality of thinking meant that I am indeed here, that I am not a figment of anybody's imagination including my own, and not a plaything of an unseen devil or deity.

It's important, I think, to remember that Descartes sought a ground of certainty and confidence because he was hoping to make a difference in human affairs. He sought, perhaps Quixote-like, to find a standpoint other than a dogmatic or ideological one (with ideology understood as a system of ideas closed to further questioning). He was, in his own way, an activist as much as a philosopher and mathematician. Indeed he was a lover of life and a cosmopolitan appreciator of different human customs.

During an extended sabbatical sojourn last winter in Paris, I had occasion to come upon a plaque affixed near a doorway on the Rue Rollin, a tiny medieval walkway off of the Rue Monge in the 5th arrondissement. The plaque was on a house where Descartes stayed on various visits to the city – he was living at the time in present-day Holland – and it includes these words from one of his countless letters: “Me tenant comme je suis, un pied dans un pays et l’autre en un autre, je trouve ma condition très heureuse, en ce qu’elle est libre” [“Taking myself as I am, one foot in this country and one in another, I find my situation pleasing, indeed liberating”; my translation]. The problem with Descartes, if such it be, is not his claim to have found solid ground. I think he did, and I feel eternally grateful to him. The problem is that there are other solid grounds for gaining the confidence to say: I am, we are. These include: I love, therefore I am; I suffer (physically or spiritually), therefore I am; and I can be taught by other people and by the world, therefore I am.

On the same small cul-de-sac, the Rue Rollin, and just a few doors down, there is another plaque in honor of the poet and philosopher Benjamin Fondane who resided there for many years. His poetry cut across movements in dadism, surrealism, and existentialism and his philosophical writing constituted, among other things, a critique of Hegel via a reading of Kierkegaard. Fondane was deported and executed by the Nazis in March, 1944. The plaque includes these words from one of his last works, titled *Exodus* (c. early 1940's): “Souvenez-vous seulement que j’étais innocent et que, tout comme vous, mortels de ce jour-là. J’avais eu, moi aussi, un visage marqué par la colère, par la pitié et la joie, un visage d’homme tout simplement!” [“I ask you only to remember that I was innocent and that, like you, mortal through and through. I, too, had a face marked by hatred, pity, and joy -- the face of a man, no more, no less”; my translation.]

Fondane's words buttress those of Descartes, and together move toward solid ground for claims to be human and to be acknowledged as such. The question I pose to today's many assertions that there are no foundations and no certainties, that all is aleatory and in flux, is simply this: On what grounds are we saying there are no grounds? The question is not, in itself, a return to a narrow positivism. On the contrary, it recognizes fully the dangers in dogmatic and ideological claims to occupy the “high” ground with regards to characterizing who and what persons are. So as I turn the last page of Baldacchino's book I leave with questions such as these: What do we know? What are the grounds for saying we have no sturdy ground? Why be so certain about uncertainty? These are human questions that concern what it means to be, to become, to remain a human being. For bringing me to them I thank John Baldacchino, through his engaging dialogue with our colleague Maxine Greene and through the articulation of his own voice in company with hers.

References

- Baldacchino, J. (2008). *Education beyond education: Self and the imaginary in Maxine Greene's philosophy*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishers.
- Descartes, R. (1996). *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. J. Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Original work published 1641.
- Emerson, R. W. (1844/1983). Experience. In *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Lectures*, pp. 471-492. New York: The Library of America.
- Fondane, B. (c. early 1940's). Préface en prose. In B. Fondane, *Exodus*. P. L'Abbé (Trans.). Toronto: Joseph Norman. (Original work written in the early 1940s in Paris under German occupation.)
- Greene, M. (1973). *Teacher as stranger: Educational philosophy for the modern age*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Greene, M. (1988). *Dialectic of freedom (John Dewey Series)*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Lampert, M. (1990). When the problem is not the question and the solution is not the answer: Mathematical knowing and teaching. *American Educational Research Journal*, 27 (1), 29-63.